

Georgia Department of Natural Resources Historic Preservation Division

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Bethlehem Baptist Church Colored School Listed in National Register

ATLANTA (January 30, 2009) –The Bethlehem Baptist Church Colored School, located in rural Harris County, was listed in the National Register on December 30, 2008. The property owner, Bethlehem Baptist Church, sponsored the nomination and church members prepared the nomination materials.

Bethlehem Baptist Church Colored School is significant in the areas of education and ethnic heritage as a rare surviving example of a one-room schoolhouse constructed to educate rural African-American children during years of racial segregation in Georgia. According to Public Schools in Georgia, 1868-1971, a statewide historic context, as late as 1910 most black schools met in homes or churches, and less than 10 percent of the allocation for public education was spent on black schools.

The exact date of construction for the Bethlehem School is not clear, but it was sometime after the church's founding in 1871. The school's existence is first mentioned in the 1901 Harris County Board of Education minutes. Grades one through eight attended Bethlehem. Teachers were qualified through the local Board of Education, but students and teachers had to work under hardship conditions with poor facilities, materials, and transportation.

The school is also significant in the area of architecture as a good intact example of a vernacular building with no stylistic features. Its simple form is typical of small one-room schoolhouses. It would have been constructed with local materials and labor, and supported primarily by the church and local

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community. It continued to be used until around 1952 when new county schools were constructed using sales tax revenue.

The Bethlehem Baptist Church Colored School is located on the property of the Bethlehem Baptist Church. The church's founding dates to 1871, but the current church building was constructed in 1970. The school, which lies to the rear of the property, is a rectangular, one-room, braced-frame building with a front-gabled roof. Exterior walls are unpainted weatherboard and the roof material is metal. Wire nails are used throughout. The foundation is primarily stacked fieldstone piers with some concrete block piers on the front end. Sills are rough-cut logs. There is a wood plank door on one gable end. A fieldstone chimney with soft red-clay mortar is on the opposite gable end. The front one-third of the school was constructed at a later date than the back two-thirds. Siding, windows, roofline, and foundation all show visible differences. The interior also exhibits differences in the two sections. Rear walls and ceiling have tongue-and-groove boards. On the section near the door, the wall area has left the framing exposed. The attic area is also partially exposed, revealing saplings used as roof joists on the older section and machine-cut framing on the newer section. There are no electrical utilities or plumbing in the building, and a fieldstone hearth appears to be the only remnant of a heat source. Two spaces on the walls were painted black for use as chalkboards. Four wooden desks remain intact.

The National Register is the federal government's official list of historic buildings, structures, sites, objects, and districts worthy of preservation. According to Richard Cloues, deputy state historic preservation officer, listing in the National Register recognizes a property's significance and ensures that the property will be taken into account in the planning of federally funded or licensed projects. In addition, owners of National Register properties may be eligible for rehabilitation tax incentives.

The Historic Preservation Division (HPD) of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources serves as Georgia's state historic preservation office. Their mission is to promote the preservation and use of historic places for a better Georgia. HPD's programs include archaeology protection and education, environmental review, grants, historic resource surveys, tax incentives, the National Register of Historic Places, community planning and technical assistance. For more information, call 404-656-2840 or visit their Web site at www.gashpo.org.